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ABSTRACT

With the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, Mongolia was severed from its exterior financial and technical support. The dramatic shift in socioeconomic conditions created a need for new forms of adult education. The nomadic women of the Gobi Desert were targeted as most at risk, and the Gobi Women's Project conducted a needs assessment in three of the six Gobi provinces. Women defined their own most urgent learning needs in the areas of livestock rearing, family care and health, literacy, income generation using locally available materials, and basic business skills. By 1996, 15,000 nomadic women were taking part in education activities offered through radio, printed materials, and visiting teachers. This booklet describes Mongolia's educational conditions and the Gobi Women's Project, with sections covering the history and culture of Mongolia; the abrupt economic change from Communism to an independent market economy; women's status, education, and literacy; low-cost forms of distance education; initial planning and development of the project; enthusiastic grassroots response; development and dissemination of instructional materials; organizational structure of the project; educational delivery through reading materials, radio programs, visiting teachers, information centers, and learning groups; experiences of five students and teachers; project achievements (empowering rural women and breaking new ground); financing; sustainability; and future directions. Includes facts about Mongolia, a glossary, a list of project innovations, photographs, and a bibliography. (SV)

EDUCATION FOR ALL

Making it work

12

INNOVATIONS SERIES

In the Green Desert

ED 425 045

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Non-formal Distance Education Project for Nomadic Women of the Gobi Desert, Mongolia

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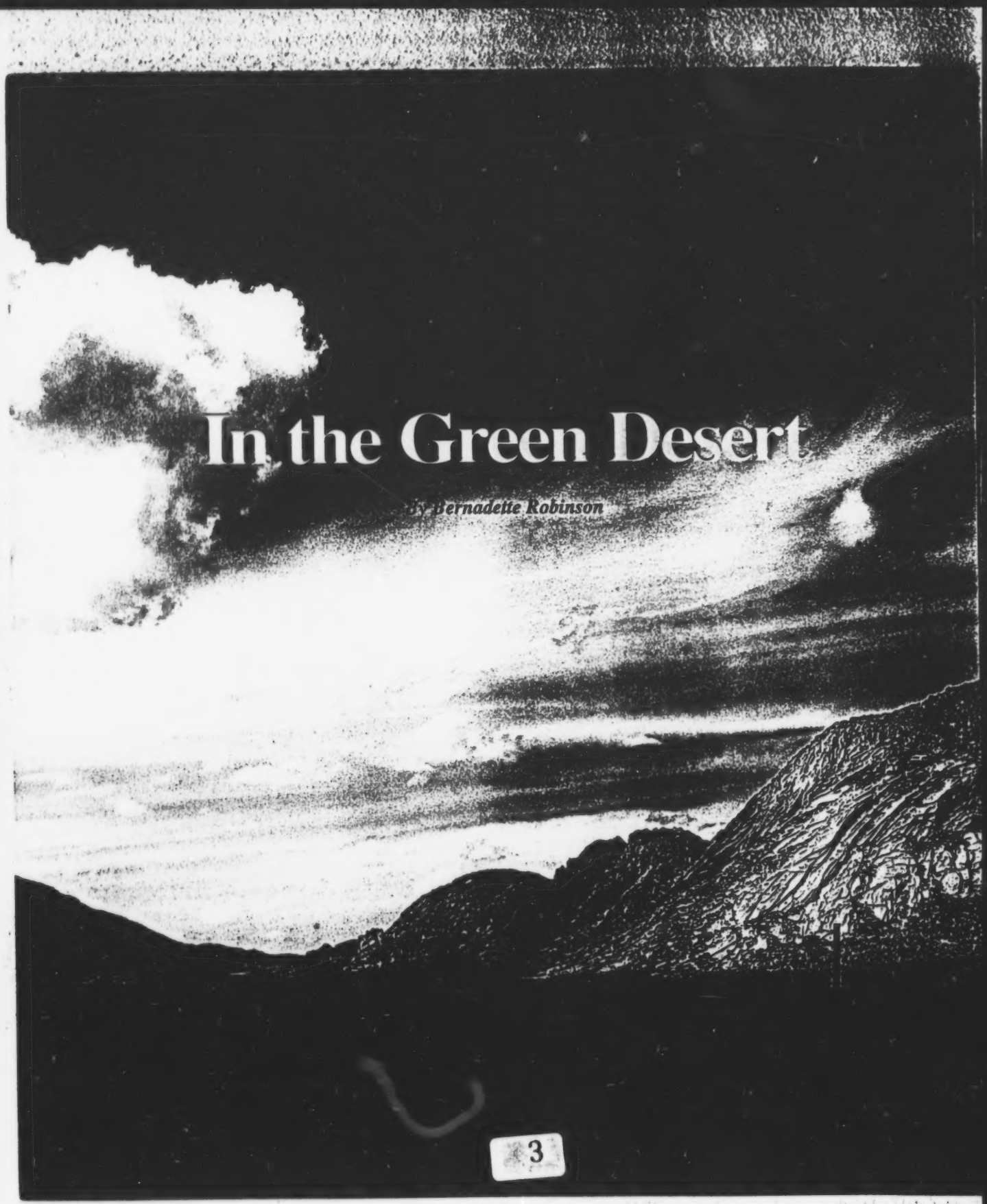

In the Green Desert

by Bernadette Robinson

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About the project...

The World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, recognized that a policy of «more of the same» would not be sufficient to achieve the goal of education for all. Educational systems in most countries clearly need an injection of fresh ideas, a broader vision of how the basic learning needs of all might be met, and the courage to turn this vision into practice.

It was the quest for an expanded and renovated vision of basic education which prompted UNESCO and UNICEF to launch their joint project «EDUCATION FOR ALL: MAKING IT WORK» right after Jomtien. The two Organizations decided to disseminate and promote examples of educational change – both in the realm of formal and non- formal education – through which the principles of Jomtien would come to life: programmes which provide learning opportunities for children, youth, and adults, including underserved groups and those with special needs; programmes which focus on actual learning acquisition, rather than on mere participation or certification requirements; programmes which aim to provide a solid foundation for life-long learning, which are responsive to the learning needs and conditions of the socio-cultural environment, and which build effective partnerships with local communities and parents.

UNESCO and UNICEF believe that effective and sustainable change in education arises from the inventiveness, experience and dedication of educators, parents and community leaders at the grassroots. The «EDUCATION FOR ALL: MAKING IT WORK» project shows that educational innovation and change are already underway in all developing countries and that even the poorest countries are able to take up the challenge of devising educational programmes to fit their means, needs, and aspirations.

The project strategy emphasizes educational innovation in practice rather than discourse. The INNOV database presents many little-known experiences, some of them with considerable potential. The most promising and significant ones are showcased in the present series of booklets, or through films contained in the EDUCATION FOR ALL VIDEOBANK. Others are grouped together and compared in a new series of THEMATIC PORTFOLIOS, devoted to critical issues in basic education.

All these resource materials are used in training workshops, inter-project visits and similar activities meant to support specialists and planners from developing countries in their struggle to turn education for all into reality.

The project team will be pleased to receive new information, comments and suggestions from all those interested in promoting change and innovation in basic education. We particularly appeal to UNICEF and UNESCO colleagues in the field to co-operate actively with the project.

For more information about the project, please contact:

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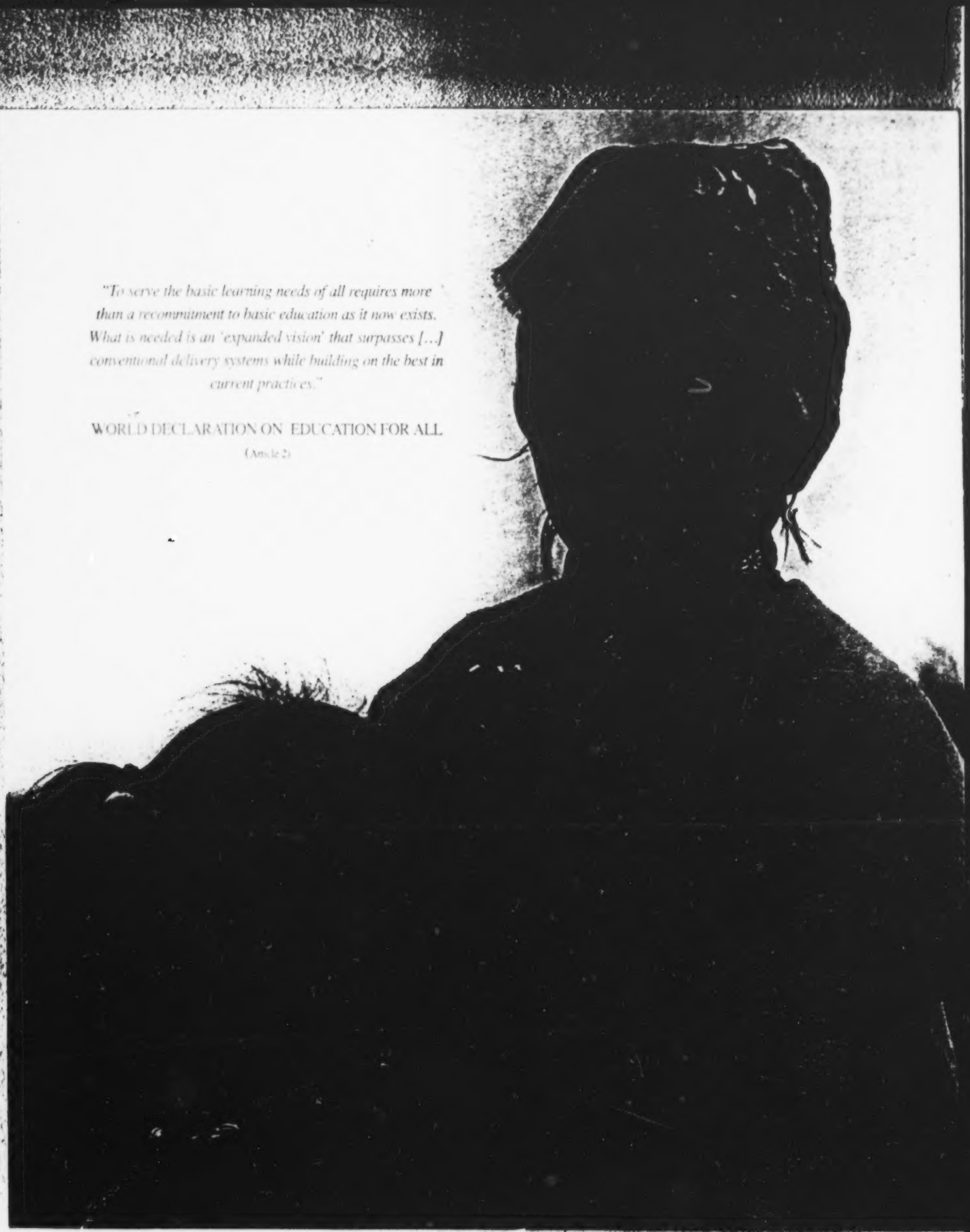
If you wish additional copies of the «Innovations series», please contact UNESCO.

"To serve the basic learning needs of all requires more than a recommitment to basic education as it now exists. What is needed is an 'expanded vision' that surpasses [...] conventional delivery systems while building on the best in current practices."

WORLD DECLARATION ON EDUCATION FOR ALL

(Article 2)



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Introduction

bundant rains, this year, have covered the steppes of the Gobi in a carpet of chives, turning it into a green desert. Javzandulam lives in a ger, or tent, in the South part of the Gobi desert with her husband and three children, a boy and two girls all under the age of 13. They own a mixed herd of 120 animals and are trying to increase it. Javzandulam, who is 37, completed seven years of schooling in a boarding school in a district centre 100 kilometres away. In the past she used to read more than she does now. She has little free time and, until she joined the Gobi Women's project in 1996, she couldn't get much to read anyway. Today, the project booklets and local newsletters are her only reading materials, apart from an occasional newspaper passed on by a friend. She also reads stories from one of the project booklets, "Mongolian Fairy Tales", to her youngest daughter.

Javzandulam has a long working day. She gets up before her husband; at 5 a.m. in the summer, later in the winter. First she milks the animals, then makes tea and breakfast for her family. She usually spends part of the morning boiling and preparing the milk, to make it into yoghurt and cheese products, some of which are dried in the sun for winter use. Before preparing a midday meal of boiled mutton soup with noodles, steamed bread and cheese, she collects and stacks animal dung for fuel.

In the afternoon, Javzandulam might plait harnesses for animals out of camel wool, make felt for boots (a new skill she learnt this year), mend clothes, sew household articles such as cushions, look after the children and the younger animals, or water and sometimes move the herds (though her son mostly does that job). The herds need milking again during the day, usually at different intervals depending on the type of animal. The animals' milk is left for churning the following day. Javzandulam usually prepares the evening meal quite late, by candlelight, when everyone is back.

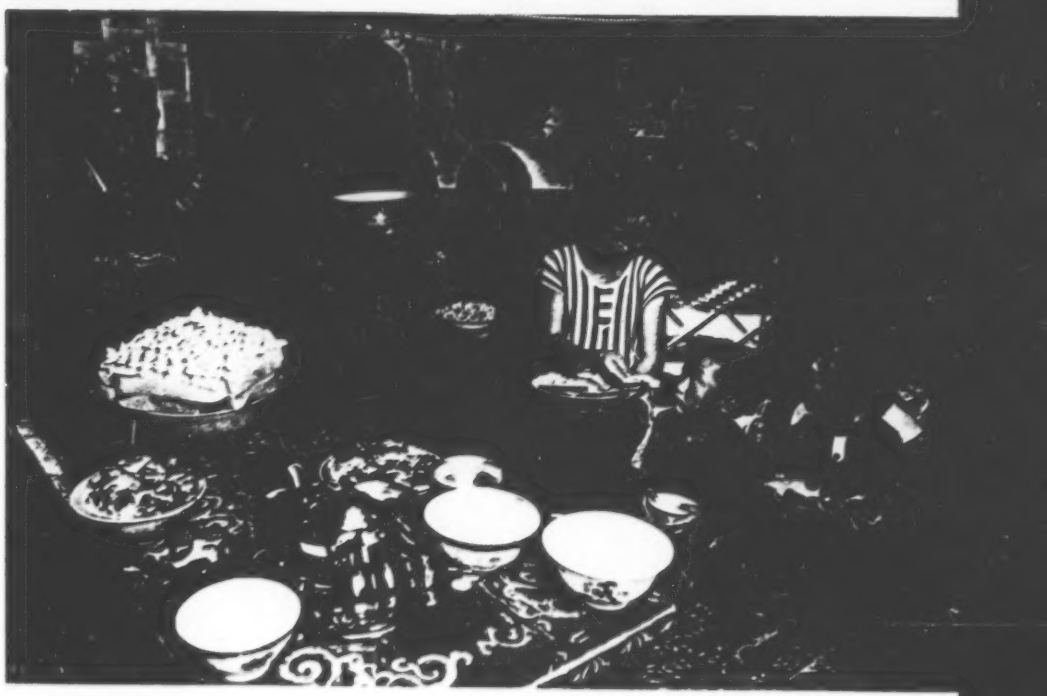
Life was not always like this. Until 1991, Javzandulam bought ready-made foods and fuel supplies in the store at the district centre but, like many others, she had more cash then, and the district centre was a hub of activity, providing such services as education, health, veterinary assistance, and facilities for culture and sport. All this has changed now and Javzandulam, like many others, has had to fall back on her own resources. Thanks to the Gobi Women's Project she has mastered new skills and relearnt old ones, from making bread and cheeses to processing animal dung for longer burning. Together with her husband, she prepares animal hides or meat for drying or sausages. Javzandulam has learnt these

jokes, and seeing what the other women are making. One has made a camel saddle for the first time and exchanged it for a camel. Javzandulam thinks she might try that too.

Javzandulam is like many women taking part in the Gobi Women's Project. She's better off than some and not as well off as others (a few now have solar panels and portable windmills to provide more electricity). What they all share, however, is new access to learning opportunities during very difficult times. What they learn through the Gobi Women's project directly affects their lives as nomads and is helping them cope with the effects of the drastic economic and social changes that occurred in Mongolia in the 1990s.

skills from the project booklets, radio programmes, and meetings with neighbouring women or her visiting teacher. Her husband also benefits from the project; he is trying out a new technique for preparing animal hides that he found in one of her books.

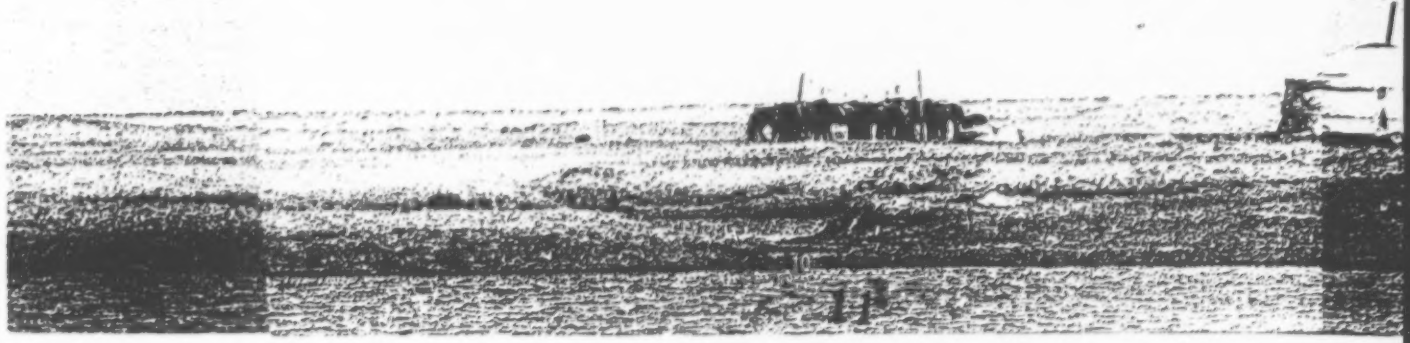
Javzandulam has little free time during the day, usually less than her husband. Despite this, she still makes time to listen to the Gobi Women's radio broadcasts. She found the first aid programmes very useful and has put together a small first aid kit as a result. Once every two weeks she rides her horse 12 kilometres to a neighbour's ger, where she and eight other women meet with the visiting teacher for an afternoon. She enjoys the exchange of news and



From 1000 BC, nomadic warriors from Mongolia were famed for their riding and archery. They frequently invaded the agricultural states on their borders. The Han Dynasty (206 BC -AD 220) built The Great Wall of China as a defensive measure against them.

Genghis Khan (1206-27) founded the Mongolian nation: by the time of his death he ruled the largest land empire the world has ever known, which included Central Asia, Persia and northern China. Two hundred years later the centres of power had moved elsewhere and Mongolia had reverted to pastoral nomadism. In the 17th century, the Manchu emperors of China divided the state into Outer and Inner Mongolia, a division which persists to this day. Outer Mongolia became the Mongolian People's Republic after the 1921 revolution which brought a Soviet-style communist government to power. In the late 1980s, a series of political reforms resulted in democratic government.

Mongolians are often described as a hospitable people. From ancient times, they have lived a nomadic way of life, using horses and camels for transport. Their settlements moved constantly: even Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, had 21 different locations before becoming established on its present site in the 18th century. Nomadic life produced the round, dome-shaped tent or ger: a mobile structure that is light and easy to dismantle. This traditional dwelling has changed little over centuries. Made of white felt, supported by a



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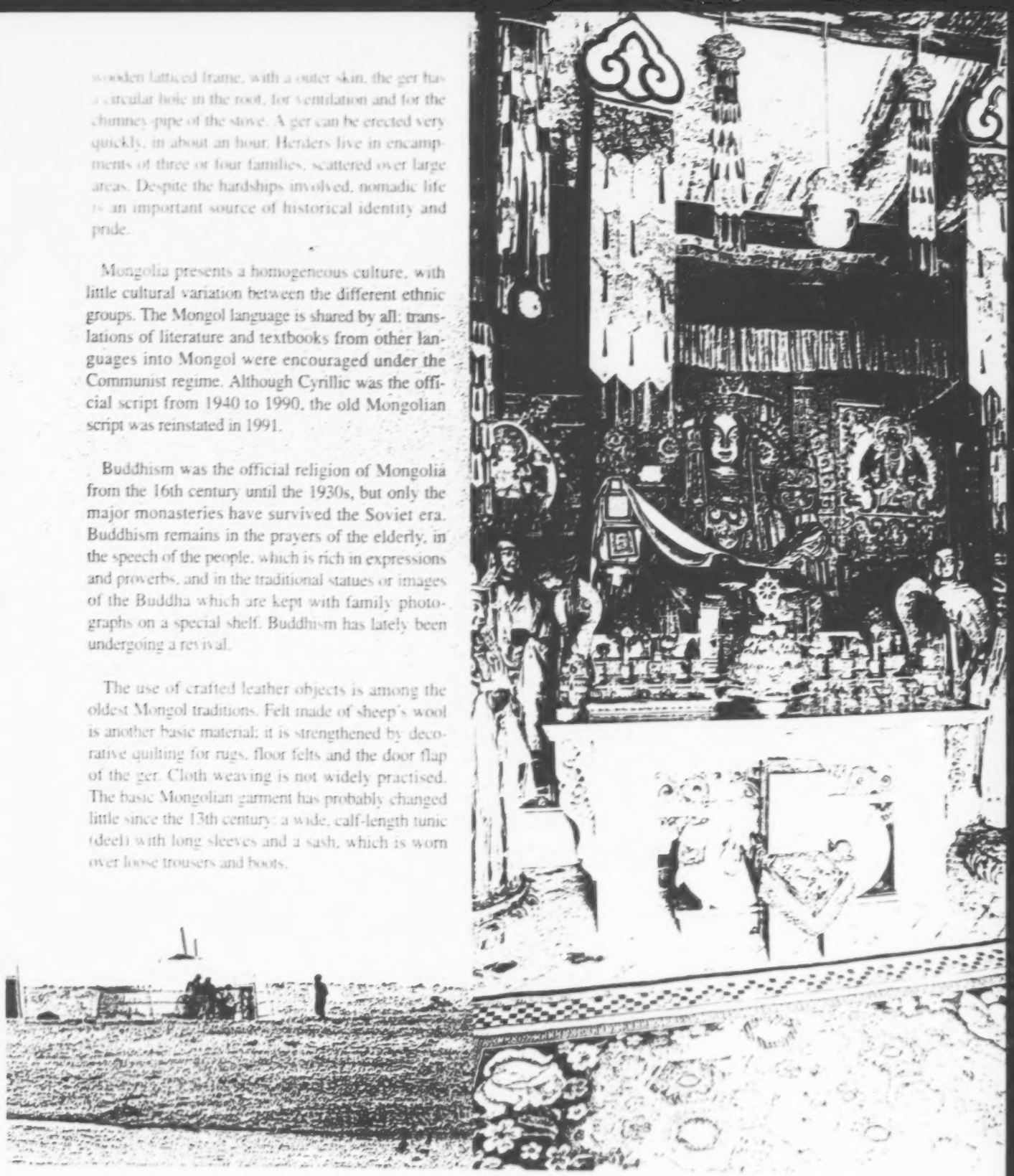
wooden latticed frame, with a outer skin, the ger has a circular hole in the roof, for ventilation and for the chimney-pipe of the stove. A ger can be erected very quickly, in about an hour. Herders live in encampments of three or four families, scattered over large areas. Despite the hardships involved, nomadic life is an important source of historical identity and pride.

Mongolia presents a homogeneous culture, with little cultural variation between the different ethnic groups. The Mongol language is shared by all: translations of literature and textbooks from other languages into Mongol were encouraged under the Communist regime. Although Cyrillic was the official script from 1940 to 1990, the old Mongolian script was reinstated in 1991.

Buddhism was the official religion of Mongolia from the 16th century until the 1930s, but only the major monasteries have survived the Soviet era. Buddhism remains in the prayers of the elderly, in the speech of the people, which is rich in expressions and proverbs, and in the traditional statues or images of the Buddha which are kept with family photographs on a special shelf. Buddhism has lately been undergoing a revival.

The use of crafted leather objects is among the oldest Mongol traditions. Felt made of sheep's wool is another basic material; it is strengthened by decorative quilting for rugs, floor felts and the door flap of the ger. Cloth weaving is not widely practised. The basic Mongolian garment has probably changed little since the 13th century: a wide, calf-length tunic (deel) with long sleeves and a sash, which is worn over loose trousers and boots.



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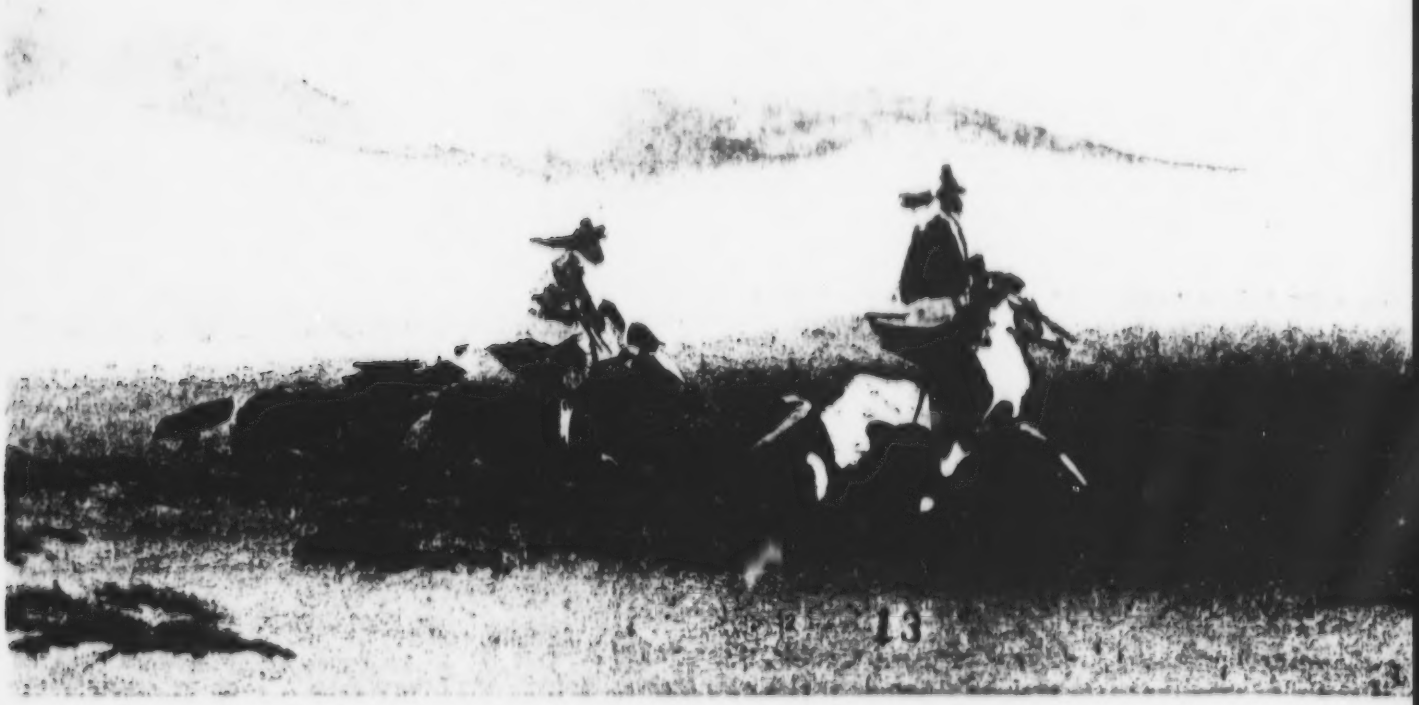
Life in the Gobi Desert

"In winter we struggle to survive and the rest of the year we struggle to prepare for winter."
This is how Mongolian nomads ruefully describe their lifestyle. The Gobi desert occupies the southern third of the country. About half a million people (30 per cent of the Mongolian population) live a nomadic or semi-nomadic life scattered across its vast plateau. They move their herds three or four times a year. Life is hard with extremes of climate ranging from 40°C in summer to -40°C in winter. With less than one person per square kilometre, the Gobi is the least populated area of Mongolia. There are few roads and only one major railway line. The electricity supply is limited and subject to frequent power cuts. Candles are used for light. There are few telephones (about 3 for 100 people) and uncertain postal services. Television is restricted to urban centres but almost all families own a radio.

According to a local saying, "a Mongolian without a horse is like a bird without wings."
Horses, sheep, goats, cattle (including yaks) and camels are often referred to as Mongolia's five treasures because of their importance in nomads' lives and survival. The nomadic economy is based on about 25 million animals. Sheep and, increasingly, goats are used for wool and cashmere, reputed to be the best in the world. Raw cashmere and live animals provide cash income as well as barter exchange. Horses provide transport and airag (fermented mare's milk, considered important for health). Camels are used for their fleece and to transport people and goods. All animals provide milk, meat and hides and their dung is used for fuel.

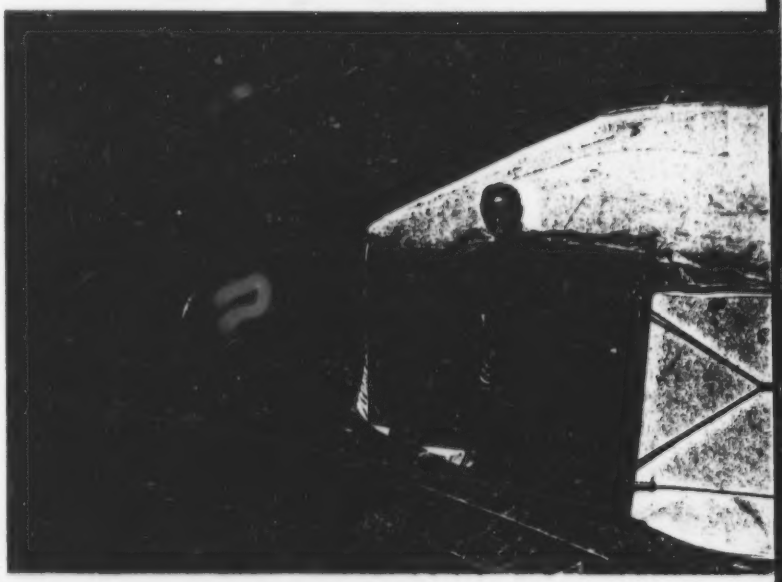


Changing times, new needs

"The most serious peacetime economic collapse of any nation this century," is how one economist described the recent dramatic changes in Mongolian society. In 1990, the country changed from a centrally-planned to a market-driven economy, and from a one-party communist state to a democratic one. Although many of the hardships resulting from this transition were shared by former communist countries in Eastern Europe, Mongolia faced additional problems of geography, harsh climate, lack of infrastructure and economic dependency.

The impact on people's lives, whether in cities or in the countryside, was huge. Almost overnight, Mongolia slipped from being a lower-middle-income country to a poor country, according to some international indicators. Until 1991, the USSR provided 30 per cent of Mongolia's income and most trade was done with the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). These sources of income dried up in 1991, with devastating results for Mongolia. In three years, crop production halved and industrial output dropped by a third as energy supplies failed. Inflation shot up to 2,000 per cent and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) plummeted to one third of its former level per capita. Social services collapsed and the population's high level of education and rate of participation were placed in jeopardy.

For Mongolian nomads, the change from the state management of herds to private ownership was, therefore, a major upheaval. Privatisation brought new hardships as well as new opportunities. In the Soviet era, the herders' standard of living was secure: herds were organised according to species, regular wages were paid irrespective of productivity, manufactured goods and services were plentiful and disasters to livestock were cushioned by the state. By 1995, 95 per cent of all livestock was in private hands and herders' work took on a different pattern. Families acquired their own mixed herds, needing more complex management and more labour, and began keeping children, especially boys, out of school to help them cope. Households became responsible for producing their own goods, obtaining services and marketing their products. At the same time, there was an increase in the number of herding households as urban people, never very far from their rural roots, moved to the countryside, to escape the problems of city life (high unemployment, high costs, scarcity of



food and lack of heating) and try and build capital through livestock ownership. It is estimated that 150,000 households are now nomadic or semi-nomadic. A minority of these is new to herding and rural life.

"Shortage of money is a new thing," remarks Nasandulam, one of the many women affected by the transition. "Before, the state sent money to all Gobi countryside people and we could buy fuel or ready-made clothes in the store. Now we need to make them both from scratch."

The decrease in free and local services created an urgent necessity for self-reliance. Much of what was previously bought had now to be made or bartered for. To complicate matters, in rural areas, less than 30 per cent of income is in cash form. As Losolmaa, another Gobi woman, explains: We needed to find new ways of surviving without money. We have raw materials which can be turned into useful things if we learn how.

A severe paper shortage added to the problems. Information became harder to get in the countryside as newspapers and other reading materials became scarce. A largely literate population was thus deprived of an essential resource. There was also a reduction in transport, many boarding schools closed and families were unable to find the food and clothing needed to subsidise children's attendance at the remaining schools. In short, the safety net of social services fell away.

Women's status and education

The women of Mongolia have been the sustaining force of the Mongol nation throughout centuries of statehood, living and raising livestock in the mountain, desert and steppe regions of the country. While they share many of the opportunities and constraints faced by women everywhere, they also experience advantages and disadvantages based on the particular traditions of Mongolia's way of life.

(The National Programme of Action for the Advancement of Women. Government of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, June 1996.)

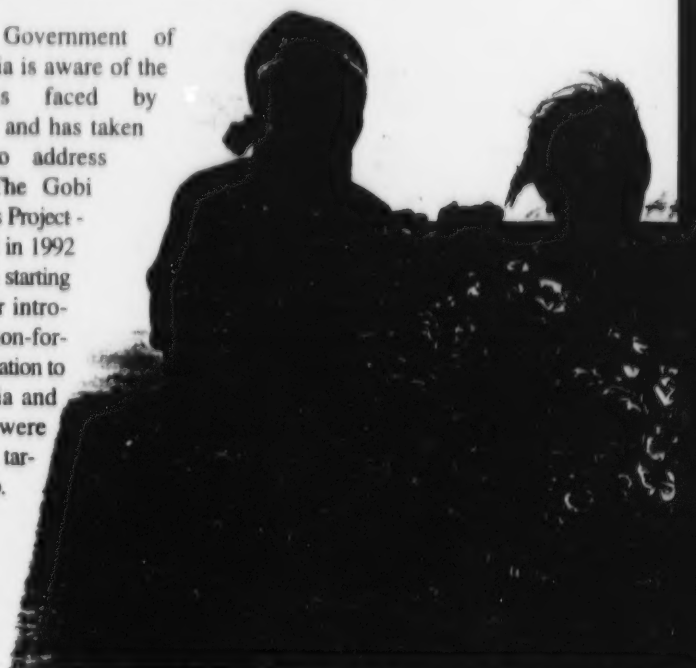
Mongolian women have traditionally enjoyed greater status and independence than many of their Asian sisters. They routinely manage the household if widowed or if their husbands are absent. Within the household, the division of labour by gender reflects traditional attitudes: women care for sheep, the source of sustenance; men care for horses, the source of speed and prestige. Although responsible for domestic duties inside the ger, women also participate in male-associated tasks, for example, milking mares or riding in horse races. Archery contests, one of the "three manly sports," historically included a female round.

Traditionally, a couple gets its own ger upon marriage, the bride brings a dowry and the son gets a share of the family herd. The emphasis on population growth under the Soviet system meant that, for women, bearing large numbers of children was considered a civic duty. The same regime provided paid maternity leave and child care. With women in the paid workforce and children at school for most of the year, parents and children were separated on a large scale for generations.

The nomadic population is an educated one. Mongolia's socialist past promoted the education of girls and women in urban and rural areas alike. By 1994, the vast majority of second-and third-level students were female. Levels of literacy are high. By 1976, 76 per cent of women were literate; by 1989, 86 per cent. Overall literacy rates in 1996 were said to be 96 per cent. However, the level of functional literacy of some rural women may be lower than expected and is at risk in present circumstances.

Today, women have equal rights to employment and education under Mongolian law. About 45 per cent of Mongolian women live a nomadic or semi-nomadic life. But transition in Mongolia, while opening up new opportunities for animal and property ownership, has had negative effects on the status of rural women. It has increased their workload, limited their opportunities for leisure and reduced their access to education, health care and information.

The Government of Mongolia is aware of the problems faced by women, and has taken steps to address them. The Gobi Women's Project - launched in 1992 - was the starting point for introducing non-formal education to Mongolia and women were the main target group.



An innovative response to change

An educated person is like a day with bright sun and an uneducated person is like a night with no stars (Mongolian proverb).

With the collapse of the former Soviet system, rural women had to cope overnight with new demands. Their traditional roles and tasks inside the encampment widened to include animals and their management. For single women herders with children, these demands were varied and heavy. Some skills of self-reliance had been lost during the Soviet years, some needed improving, and some were unfamiliar still, such as marketing goods and engaging in private enterprise. It became clear that learning to do new things, or new ways of doing familiar things, would be important for coping with the changing situation. Gobi women, especially those who were heads of households, were identified as a particularly vulnerable group in the transition period.

The Government of Mongolia approached UNESCO for assistance in finding a solution to their problems. The result was the Gobi Women's Project. It began in 1992 as a three-way partnership between DANIDA (Danish International Development Assistance), who funded the project with a grant of US$ 1.4 million; UNESCO, who provided technical assistance for its implementation; and the Mongolian Government, who granted the infrastructure, some resources and the people to make it work. The target group was made up of 15,000 nomadic women in the six Gobi provinces.

The project presented several challenges:

- How to meet the women's new needs for information and education.
- How to reach large numbers of learners scattered over vast distances with minimal resources of transport, communications and funds.
- How to create a decentralised framework of adult education for people used to centralised planning and control.
- How to develop a learning system and materials appropriate for nomadic women's lives, customs and culture.

To meet these challenges, non-formal education was introduced as the approach and distance education as the means. Both were new to Mongolia, and met with mixed reactions, from suspicion that it was "poor education for the poor" to the attitude that non-formal education was better than no education at all.

The Gobi Women's Project had two main objectives: to create learning materials to meet the Gobi women's new needs and to develop Mongolia's capacity to provide appropriate, adapted non-formal education for its people. Its aim was to help nomadic women survive the many rapid changes affecting their lives, through new access to learning opportunities which were "close to life, close to truth, close to needs" (Marc Gilmer, UNESCO, Paris).

About Distance Learning...

The Mongolians designed their distance education to support the values of learning without frontiers : the removal of barriers to educational opportunity (such as restrictions of time, place, choice and pace of study), open access, creation of learning communities, lifelong learning and democratisation. The aim was to take opportunities for education and training to learners, wherever they might be. Adults could, furthermore, learn while earning and remain with their families. At all times, learning was placed at the heart of everyday life, context and needs. The target group, the Gobi women, determined the course content in advance. They were then provided with learning materials, based on sound instructional principles and clear communication. Learners monitored their progress through self-testing and coursework assessment. Face-to-face contact with tutors or other learners remained important for motivating students and for demonstrating practical skills. Distance education is sometimes thought to require new technology, but this was not the case in the Gobi Women's Project, which used the combined media of print, radio, audiocassettes, tutor support and occasional face-to-face meetings.

Debate around costs was lengthy in the Mongolia project. As the cost of preparing materials is the same for 10 or 10,000 students, initial investment was high but was made with the notion of extension in mind. Once materials are prepared, the unit cost drops in proportion to the number of learners enrolled. Large numbers of students guarantee economies of scale, but savings also depend on the choice of media and the amount of face-to-face teaching involved. The Gobi Women's Project was Mongolia's first distance education project and has laid the ground for new initiatives.

The Gobi Women's Project

As previously mentioned, the Gobi Women's Project took place in a context of acute economic crisis and anxiety about the future. The quality of life - if not the survival - of the rural population, especially nomadic women, was at stake. The project's goal was to help empower women to make decisions and take actions which would enhance the quality of their lives in a changing political, social and economic structure. The first step was a needs analysis.

A careful needs analysis was carried out in three of the six Gobi provinces in 1992. Over 140 families were consulted, along with provincial and district officials and community leaders. The purpose of this was to pinpoint basic learning needs and to learn more about the lives of the women. The notions of non-formal and distance education were unfamiliar and not everyone was convinced it would work. However, people at every level were willing to "give it a try."

Little by little, the nomadic women, who had lost the habit of expressing themselves, became more articulate in defining their own needs and learning agenda. Their requests, like themselves, were direct, practical and down-to-earth:

"We need a booklet about the processing of cashmere wool, and how to do it in our present conditions."

"We'd like to know how to process and dye skins well."

"We want to know more about the new laws, especially those on herders rights."

"We want to know about how to produce wool for knitting."

The nomads established their most urgent needs which ranged from livestock rearing techniques; family care (family planning, health, nutrition, and hygiene); literacy (the maintenance and upgrading of literacy skills); income-generation using locally available raw materials and basic business skills for the new market economy. The needs analysis led to a model of non-formal education which fitted the life-style and circumstances of nomadic women, using existing resources where possible. It also stimulated considerable interest in the project and paved the way for action.

Preparing the Project

Distance learning requires a high level of careful and detailed planning in advance if it is to work effectively, so the first year of the project was devoted to three main tasks: establishing an administrative infrastructure and planning the logistics; developing a learning system and materials; and training people for different roles. Older people were particularly valued, as they were a source of traditional knowledge and skills. Instructors were chosen from a wide variety of well-qualified local people — doctors, teachers, vets — many of whom were nomads themselves.

An important aspect of the training was finding new approaches to teaching adults. Formerly, education was for children only, and limited to institutions. There was no precedent for adult education, which needed different teaching and learning styles and the all-important ingredient of motivation. The practical, useful nature of the programme had to be constantly stressed.

Consultative committees were set up at national and local levels. Print and radio production groups were established. A Gobi Women's Project radio studio was set up with the state-owned Mongol Radio in Ulaanbaatar. Three local radio studios (reaching all six provinces) were re-equipped and their producers and technicians got special training. International consultants from UNESCO, Australia, Denmark, Norway, Great Britain and the United States of America worked with their Mongolian counterparts in Ulaanbaatar to develop the centrally-produced learning materials: print and radio lessons on health, literacy and income generation. Local print materials and radio programmes concentrated

at first on specifically local concerns arising from climatic or environmental differences.

Training took off with a workshop for the new non-formal education team. Guidelines for a teacher-training programme were developed, using a cascade model. Ten teacher-trainers, one from each pilot district, would be trained, then each in turn coached ten teachers in their own districts. The visiting teachers had access to a total of 14 Russian jeeps to travel to learners in their home gers. Lastly, and most importantly, 1,500 Gobi women were selected to participate. As a fifth of them were not equipped, 240 locally- produced radios were shared around, along with 25,000 batteries.

The Pilot Phase

The pilot phase took place from January to May 1995. It began with a three-day crash course in district centres for women from 10 districts in the six

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Gobi provinces. At the crash course, the women received the booklets, pens and paper, batteries and radios, and met their visiting teachers. Each teacher was responsible for 15 learners and was expected to visit them once or twice a month. Given the distances between nomadic families, women were encouraged to involve their families in their learning activities. They didn't need much encouragement: after three years of educational "famine" there was an enormous hunger for learning. Although the project targeted women, families participated from the start. For example, a solitary husband turned up with the women at one of the crash courses, instructed by his wife to participate and take notes. Her advanced state of pregnancy prevented her from travelling.

An unexpected side effect of the crash course was the number of men who participated in the project. Crash courses often became lively social gatherings as well as achieving their aim of testing the system.

During this pilot phase, feedback was gathered from questionnaires, field-trips and reports for use in improving the main phase. An evaluation showed that the system was feasible and indicated where improvements were needed. It also showed that the learning opportunities and materials were valued and found useful by the women learners and visiting teachers.

The Main Phase

The main phase began in January 1996, finishing in December 1996. The scale of the operation increased, more materials were produced and distributed, more radio programmes were prepared and transmitted, and the logistics of co-ordinating and managing became more complex. This time, the programme involved ten times as many women: 15,000 of them, aged 15-45 years, in 62 districts, with 620 visiting teachers.

The pattern of activity was similar to that of the pilot phase: over 2,000 radios and 40,000 batteries were distributed. Centrally-produced booklets were sent from Ulaanbaatar to province centres. Weekly radio programmes were broadcast, from the capital and the three local stations. Thirty Russian jeeps were provided for project activities.

Most significantly, the levels of local activity increased. Small information centres were set up in many sums. Increased communication and collaboration began to develop between neighbouring sums and provinces. The women organized local markets, with exhibitions of handicrafts and sales of products. Concepts such as learners' needs, feedback, discussion and teamwork were more easily grasped on a local level. When the central authorities saw how active local groups were in organising their own learning, and how satisfied and productive they became, they gave the project their full encouragement.

Supplementary learning materials were produced and a variety of local initiatives were taken. One initiative was the travelling box in Bayanhongor province. This contained resource materials which visiting teachers could take with them on visits or send round their group, and was a means for learners to exchange letters with their visiting teachers. It also became a parallel postal service. A great desire for communication and information was evident. The local radio programmes were very popular.

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Many nomads were invited to speak and give interviews. The result was a closer-knit community with much to talk about at each new get-together. As befits a hospitable people, the teachers' visits were occasions of great celebration with eating and drinking. There was a similar joyous atmosphere during the crash courses where there was also singing, and song contests were held.

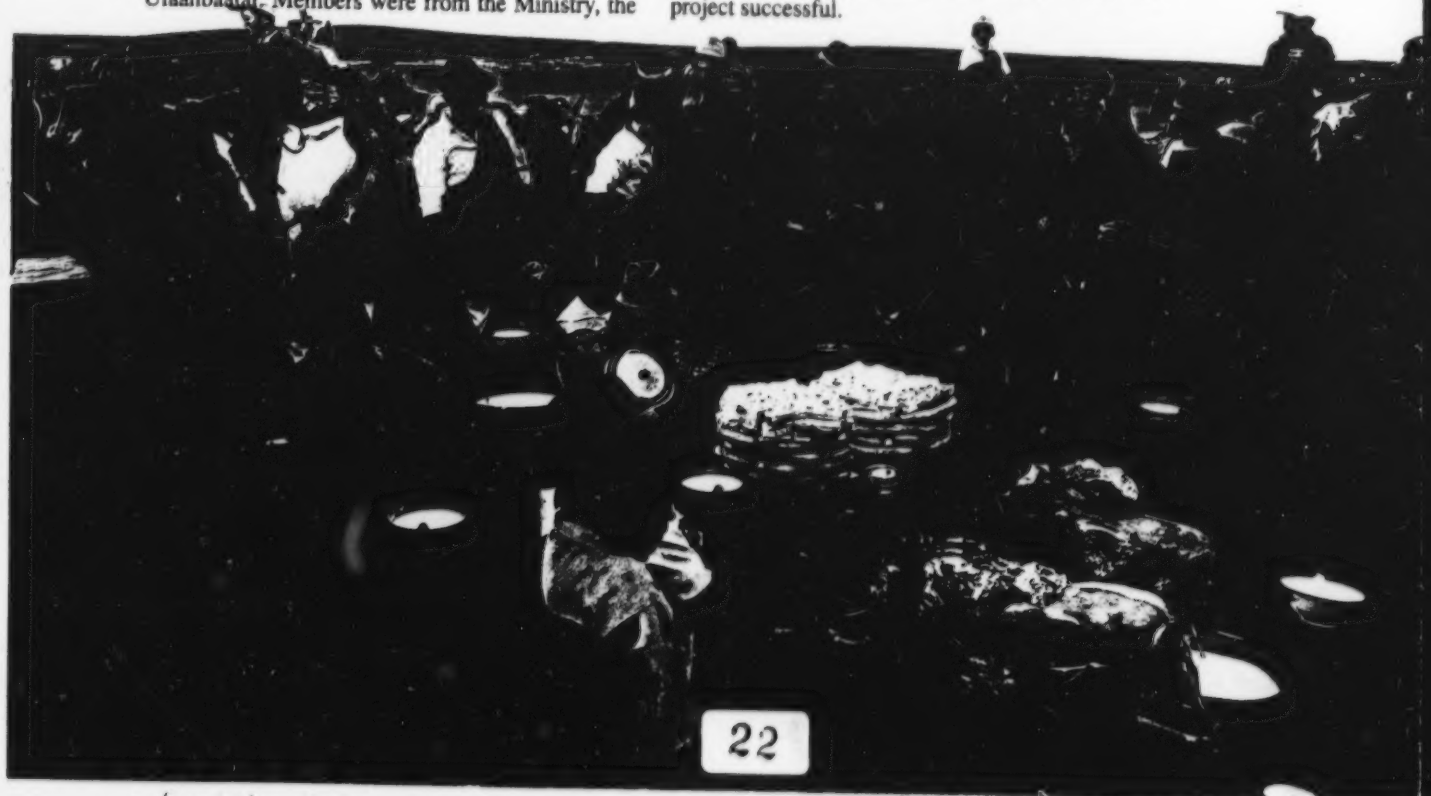
An evaluation of the project was carried out in November 1996 and its findings used to shape the follow-on project being planned by UNESCO and the Government of Mongolia, for family-based and youth education (1997-2000).

Organisational structure

The structure of the Gobi Women's Project reflected the country's administrative structure in general, with national, provincial and district committees. The National Coordinating Committee (NCC) was based in the Ministry of Science and Education in Ulaanbaatar. Members were from the Ministry, the Educational Research Institute, Mongol Radio and other educational institutions. The committee's role was to coordinate the project, monitor progress, control finance and carry out evaluations.

A core group within the NCC ran the programme on a day-to-day basis. This included the leaders of the print and radio production groups. The only full-time staff were the National Project Coordinator and 30 jeep drivers. All other personnel- including the National Project Director- were part-time. As "designated volunteers", they did not receive a project salary, but combined Gobi Women Project work with their other tasks.

Each of the six Gobi provinces had a coordinating committee as did each of the 62 districts. These local committees had less than a dozen members who came from all walks of life: doctors, veterinarians, accountants, teachers and members of organisations such as the Women's Federation. District and province committees reported regularly to the national committee. Many Gobi people gave freely of their time and personal resources to make the project successful.



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The learning system

The Gobi Women's Project used a combination of printed materials, radio programmes (and to a lesser extent, audio-cassettes), crash courses and contact with visiting teachers and other learners, where possible. Learning materials were created both locally and in the capital.

Reading matter

Health, income generation and literacy support were the main themes of the 23 project booklets produced in Ulaanbaatar. The booklets covered topics such as family planning, making felt, camel saddles and Mongol deels or traditional garments, preparing milk and meat products, working with leather; growing vegetables, converting animal dung into fuel, as well as civics and small business skills. The literacy support booklets were on Mongolian fairy tales, mathematics and the environment. The booklets were distributed by jeep from Ulaanbaatar and took between one and seven weeks to reach the learners.

Newsletters, information sheets, teachers' booklets and demonstration materials were also produced locally. These supplemented centrally produced booklets and developed materials in response to local needs and circumstances.

Tuning In

Radio programmes were produced both centrally, in Ulaanbaatar, and locally. Mongol Radio had national coverage while three local radio stations covered the six Gobi provinces between them. Most programmes were related to the booklets and used a variety of formats. Two of them - Sunrise, a half-hour general programme, and Shortcut, in support of literacy - were broadcast from Ulaanbaatar. The weekly local radio programmes, however, had a stronger grassroots relevance and topicality. Reception was generally good and the programmes were popular.

Visiting teachers

"We are learning through radio lessons and books, but it is very important that the visiting teacher

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comes to explain things that we don't understand," commented one learner, Dashwa. "The books are full of information, so there are always some points that need further explanation." Visiting teachers were each responsible for about 15 learners. They visited women in their gers, often travelling long distances. They helped with any problems found in the booklets or radio programmes or in carrying out practical work, checked the learner's learning journal, brought new supplementary materials and occasionally met with groups of women in the district centres, thus reducing any sense of isolation they felt. Visiting teachers were also an important link in the system, providing feedback to district and province coordinating committees, and identifying new learning needs.

Information centres

Small information centres, which also served as meeting places, were set up in district and province centres. These were usually a room in a local government building or school and contained a set of project booklets and other learning materials, information leaflets, posters, and a radio (sometimes

with an audio-cassette player). The room also housed occasional exhibitions of women's work and was used for group meetings. It could serve as a base for visiting teachers and teacher-trainers. Maps of the area on the walls, showed where learners' gers were located. Progress charts of learners' achievements proved very motivating for the women and were regularly consulted.

Learning groups

The programme started with a crash course of three days at a district centre. At this, women received materials, met their visiting teachers and had demonstrations and teaching sessions (for example, in bread-making). At other times, women met together in small groups with their visiting teachers at district centres or one of the gers. This kind of contact provided much social support and an opportunity for direct teaching, skill development and exchange of experience and news.

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Learners and teachers

Whether as learners, teacher-trainers, visiting teachers, radio journalists, writers or committee members, Gobi women played a variety of roles in the project.

Dulanijav and Tsengel

Dulanijav and Tsengel are learners who live in neighbouring gers. Dulanijav is a 29- year-old mother of two who moved from the city to the countryside five years ago when she married. She needed survival skills in the countryside and, through the project, has learned to make deels and children's clothes. Her friend Tsengel, a countrywoman aged 44, has used her new-found knowledge to produce items of clothing and food. Both can now make felt (for boots), crochet cushion covers and recycle old clothes into new things. Dulanijav and Tsengel meet with a group of several other women once a week and enjoy the social gathering. What do their families think of this work?

Our families have seen what we do and they support it... they try to give us free time and help to make us tools that we can use... my husband made me a crochet hook from a sheep's bone.

Darimaa

Darimaa works from 8 a.m. until late at night. As a teacher-trainer, she is responsible for 10 teachers in the district of Dundgov. She selects them according to their skills and expertise and organises their schedules. She also has a role as a visiting teacher. Her travels to the gers of learners take her on journeys of 200-300 km. Apart from her project work, Darimaa has a full-time job as a school principal, with responsibility for 306 pupils. She is also Chairperson of the district Women's Council. Of her four children, she has two at university in Ulaanbaatar, one in secondary school, and one in kindergarten.

With such a busy life, why did she take on extra work for the Gobi Women's Project?:

"I know how many problems countrywomen have, and I wanted to help," she replies. "I can see how beneficial the project really is. The women can make deels and other clothes - they can't buy clothes in shops now - and they can sell some of them through the Women's Council."

Magvan

Magvan, aged 50, is a visiting teacher. She also teaches Arts and Crafts full-time in a secondary

school. She spends her weekends and holidays working on the project. Her husband sometimes helps out by taking her on his motorbike to visit gers. Magvan thinks the best thing about the project was its effect on the women. "They're learning by themselves from the booklets," she says. "They cooperate, they share knowledge and skills and they help each other if the book is hard to understand. In my lessons the women have learned how to make shoes and boots out of felt and second-hand materials, so they don't have to buy them any more."

Oyunsuren is a junior doctor in a provincial centre who combines her full-time job with four hours a week on the Gobi Women's Project. Oyunsuren prepares radio programmes, writes articles for the locally-produced newsletter, attends meetings of the Province Coordinating Commission and sometimes visits women and families. Her special interest is women's health and family planning, for which there was no state provision until 1991. She explained how the local radio programmes on health differed from the ones produced in the capital: Ulaanbaatar programmes are designed for general information. I am very close to our local women and can give them specific advice. We respond very quickly to the problems they identify. She is proud of the "How to take care of young girls," which she considers her best programme. "This topic can help to make the next generation of women healthier," she explains. "Under socialism we didn't mention young girls' problems because it was somehow a prohibited topic and some mothers and girls were too shy to talk to each other."

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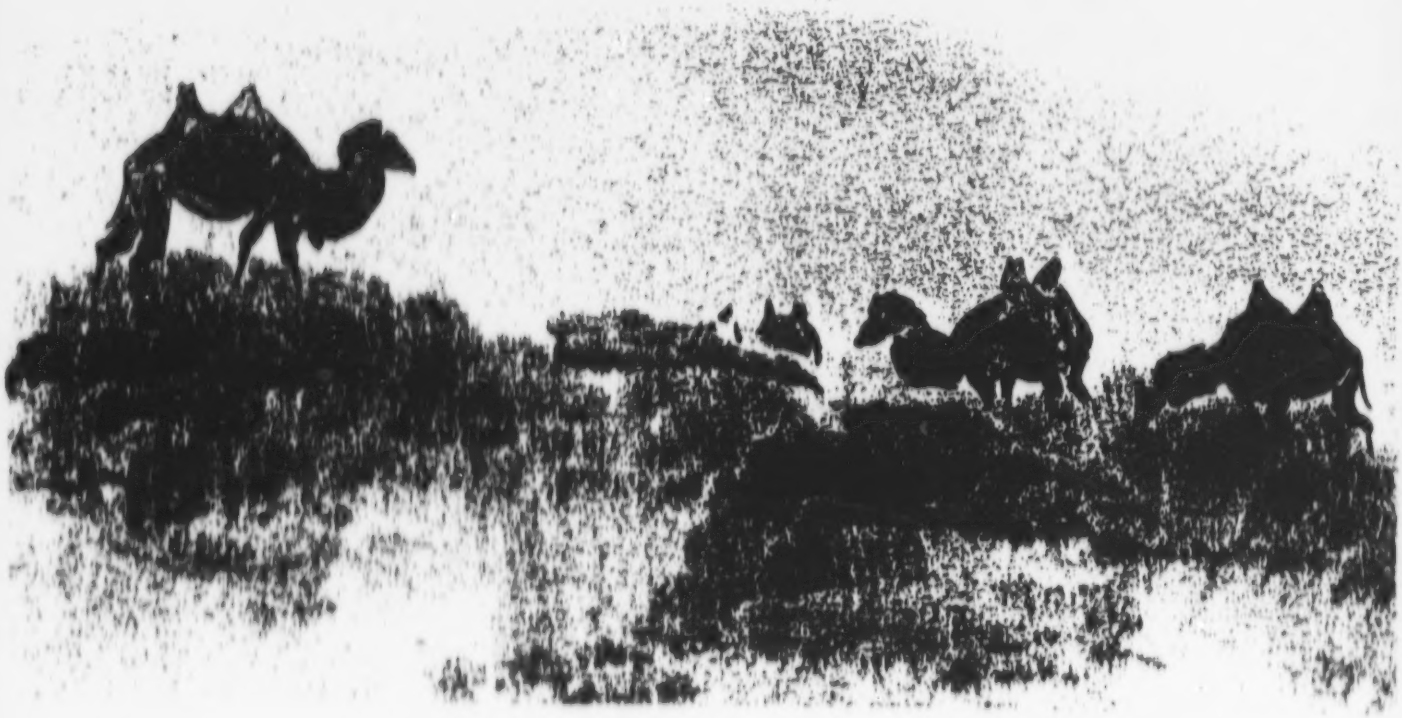
Few examples of subjects and skills

Health
Family planning, health, hygiene, nutrition, first aid

Survival and income-generating skills
Producing wool, refining camel fleece, making felt, camel saddles, Mongol deels or traditional garments, boots, recycling old clothing into new articles, crocheting, embroidery, quilting (felt and leather) baking bread, learning traditional recipes, preparing milk products, preparing meat for drying and sausages, growing vegetables, using plants and flowers for medicinal or cosmetic use or for producing dye, converting animal dung into fuel, working with leather; livestock rearing techniques, processing hides

Business skills
Price negotiating, planning, production, accounting, marketing and selling products

Literacy and numeracy support
Mongolian fairy tales, mathematics, civics, the environment, current affairs



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Achievements

Empowering the Gobi women

In the words of a district governor in Omnogobi, the project helped Gobi women to understand how to survive. It showed them the importance of not waiting for someone else to help them, but helping themselves. Women developed better survival skills and income-stretching strategies. Social interaction with other women was another immeasurable improvement in the women's often isolated lives. "The Gobi Women's Project has given these women a new life," remarked a visiting teacher in Datzin Gol. "They've become really good friends and are not so isolated. They ride up to 12 kilometres to meet each other and do things as a group. They constantly share what they know and that's new."

The project didn't only reach out to women, it managed to involve other family members. Men learnt skills such as how to make a container for processing leather, or a loom from pre-Soviet times, reconstructed from old photos, which the women then used to re-learn the craft of weaving ornamental braid. Men also showed interest in the information on family planning. In other cases, men's interest was aroused by the benefits they received, like the herder who declared: "I support my wife because when she got involved she made lots of good food, good bread!" Women outside the project followed the radio programmes and frequently asked to join in the project and get the booklets. The wider interest shown also indicated new, unmet needs in Mongolian society.

Thanks to the work of educated and qualified people in rural areas, the flowering of activity at local level was one of the strengths of the project. Local activity has taken on a dynamic of its own,

initiating, supplementing and adapting the programme to fit local circumstances. It has created strong local ownership of the programme and a demand for more.

Breaking new ground

The project showed how distance education can be implemented successfully in a vast country like Mongolia, with low population density, very scattered settlements, and poor communication and transport. (A member of the National Coordination Committee).

The project broke new ground in introducing non-formal and distance education to Mongolia and stimulated the further development of both. It broke down barriers to learning by providing opportunities which could not have been provided by traditional means. New ideas of continuing and lifelong education for adults were introduced and turned into action. The project also implemented a decentralised programme in a country which was used to very centralised educational provision and control.

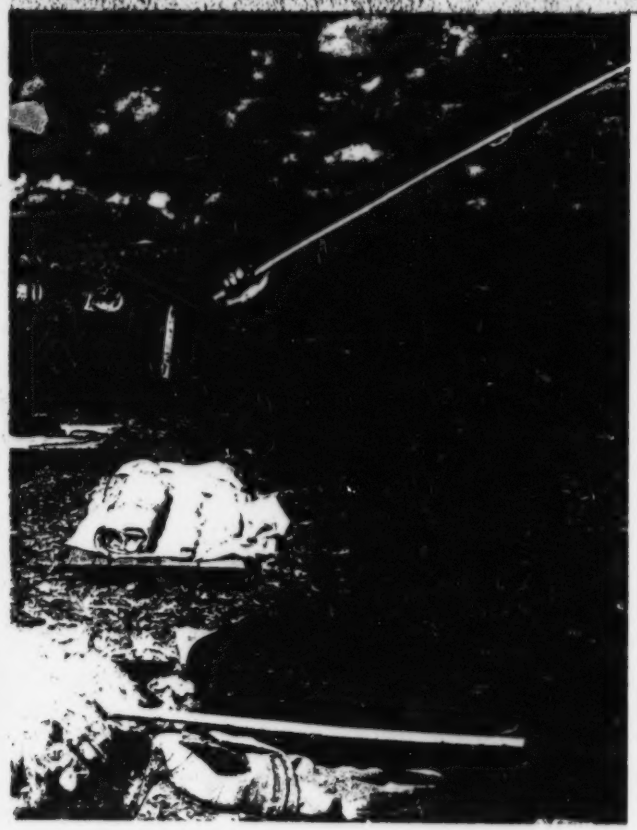
Financing and sustainability

Financing the Gobi Women's Project required the injection of outside funds at a time of acute economic crisis. The funds, mainly from DANIDA, provided equipment (items to re-equip local radio stations, 39 tons of paper, radios and batteries for learners, jeeps and petrol), technical assistance and training. The Mongolian Government also provided some resources in the form of logistical and institutional support (including the services of people).

During the project life, there were few allocations of funds in the government's education budget for non-formal education - understandably, given the financial cuts in the formal education system. Apart from one officer with responsibility for it in the Ministry of Science and Education, no full-time staff posts existed for non-formal education. This may change with the development of recent new policy and legislation to implement the policy. Already, a few aimags have taken local initiatives in funding a full-time officer responsible for non-formal education at the aimag education centre, reflecting the change to a decentralised education system in general. First steps in the institutionalising of non-formal education have been taken, though in the long term sustainability and status will depend on resource allocation by central government

The Gobi Women's Project was provided free to learners. They received booklets, materials (sometimes radio and batteries) and "crash" courses free of charge. If the project is to be sustainable in the future, some cost-sharing may be needed. Already, many women outside of the Gobi Women's Project have asked to buy the booklets, so there is some potential for cost-recovery. The visiting teachers, on the other hand, carried some costs for participating in the project. They often paid for their travel to learners' gers and sometimes bought materials to make teaching aids, as well as giving their time without payment. The project has depended on the goodwill and voluntary efforts of visiting teachers during the present crisis period, but in the long term this may not continue without some incentives.

To be sustainable, funding will be needed for the ongoing creation of materials at central and regional levels, for paper and equipment, for visiting teachers (if only to meet their expenses), and to ensure that all learners have access to working radios. One possible obstacle may be rising costs of radio use, as Mongol Radio moves to charging for its services in line with the market economy.



Is the Gobi Women's Project a temporary measure for the transitional period in Mongolia or does non-formal education have a permanent place in the future. It is difficult to make predictions in the uncertain environment of countries in transition. Nonetheless, indications so far are that non-formal education has taken root in Mongolia. The Gobi Women's Project has introduced ideas and approaches that are likely to persist in a variety of forms. Structures have been set in place which can survive. The next project planned by UNESCO and the Mongolian Government, on non-formal education for rural families and urban youth, will help consolidate the achievements gained so far. The funding of this next project, again mainly by DANIDA, can provide a bridge between the donor-funded Gobi Women's Project and assumption of greater financial responsibility by the Mongolian Government, given improvement in the economic situation.

The Gobi Women's Project was a challenging one to implement. It achieved a large measure of success in a short time. Not surprisingly, some problems remained to be solved at the end of the main phase (that is, its first year of a full-scale presentation). These offer useful lessons for similar projects, such as the following:

- Co-ordinating activities

Making a distance learning system function well is a complex task, whatever the context. When one part of the system develops problems, it can affect the smooth functioning of the all. In the Gobi Women's Project, late production of some of the printed booklets diminished the quality of the learning resources and system. The radio programmes were broadcast as scheduled but sometimes long before learners had received the related booklets. Different parts of a distance learning system (print, radio, local and central activities, delivery of materials) need to be well-coordinated and managed if the whole system is to be effective.

- Producing self-study materials on time

Distance learning depends on the availability of materials to learners. Late delivery of printed mate-

- Teamwork

One challenge for the Gobi Women's Project staff and contributors was to develop new ways of working. The task of producing multi-media materials requires individuals with different skills and job-roles to work together in new ways, sharing information in a routine manner. Production groups need to harmonise their efforts and collaborate closely to produce well-integrated radio and print materials. Local material producers also need to know central plans in advance so that they can align their materials accordingly. Teamwork and regular communication within and between groups are essential for developing good learning materials and for co-ordinating the roles of centrally and locally produced materials. Information needs to flow two ways, between Ulaanbaatar and the regions and records kept.

rials is a familiar but often avoidable problem. There are two main causes: late handover of manuscripts by writers and slippage of schedules in production stages. A further factor in the case of the Gobi Project was the late delivery from abroad of paper for printing.

Writers deliver manuscripts late because they lack enough training, time, support or management. Lateness raises problems for editing and printing, distribution to learners, learner progress and co-ordinating with other course activities. It may also cut out essential processes which ensure quality, such as review and revision, testing the materials with some learners, editing and improving them before printing. Projects using distance education need to ensure that either the materials are ready before learners are registered or are certain to be ready when needed. This is particularly important in countries such as Mongolia where communications and transport are limited and recovery of missed deadlines is difficult. The process of materials development for distance education needs careful control and management.

- Quality of learning materials

Learning materials for self-study need to be of a good standard because they are the pivot on which open and distance learning turns. They may be the only learning resource an isolated student has. Standards need to be defined and communicated to materials developers. A good start was made in the Gobi Women's Project, especially in creati dio programmes and local materials. The next step is to improve the quality of centrally-produced printed booklets and to integrate them more closely with radio programmes. Self-study texts need to incorporate those features which international experience and research show to be effective for learning, for example, learner activities and feedback on them. They should also match learners' language levels and pre-existing knowledge (though difficult to do

with a diverse target group). The skills staff need to produce good self-study texts as they are often new ones. Training practice and feedback to writers are essential ingredients in building capacity, though not always given enough time or attention in the development process. Training should be viewed more as an investment and less as a cost in projects of this kind since it builds essential and transferable skills.

- Supporting visiting teachers

Visiting teachers were important in supporting students' learning. A major challenge given the particular circumstances of Mongolia, was how to make them mobile enough to carry out their roles. Transport was not readily available. Though project jeeps were provided, other local demands on them tended to take priority over visiting teachers' needs. Many visiting teachers themselves took the initiative, finding their own transport and the funds for it. Some had accompanied local officials making routine visits. Male visiting teachers usually had more options for transport than the females, one reason given in some sums for choosing more men to be visiting teachers. Making visiting teachers more mobile would help to improve the quality and consistency of learner support but the issue remains how best to do it and finance it.

- Assessment of learning

One large challenge is the assessment of learning. In the Gobi Women's Project it was done by visiting teachers, each using their own approach, usually by checking learners' notebooks or written activities in the self-study booklets. Other visible outcomes of learning were the products and handicrafts, often impressive in range and quality. While crafts and skills are relatively easy to evaluate, other kinds of learning, such as literacy or knowledge gains) are more difficult. The next step is to work out an assessment strategy and instruments for all to use. As well as providing indicators of learning, this would give specific feedback to material developers.

- Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation took place at central and aimag levels. The project was able to gain much self-knowledge from these. However, monitoring activities now need to evolve from an emphasis on inspection to a more developmental role, providing useful management information totally adapted to the context. Another step needed, especially for a larger-scale project, is a database on local and central activity, materials and learners, so that information on different aspects of the whole system becomes accessible when needed. Without this, some kinds of evaluation activities will not be possible.

- Gaining credibility

A challenge in any distance education or non-formal education programme is to gain credibility. Distance education is frequently regarded with suspicion in many countries new to it. Credibility is established most of all by its visible products (most importantly the learning material) and results, together with the status it has in official policy and plans. The challenge here for the Gobi Women's Project is to continue to build on the strong start made.

Conclusion

The Gobi Women's Project is a significant landmark in the establishment of non-formal and distance education in Mongolia. Its success has led to pressure within the country, and from the President himself, for its wider application. The next steps in the development of an expanded, revised model have already been taken. Together, UNESCO and the Government of Mongolia, supported by DANIDA funding, have developed a national programme of non-formal education. The focus is on family-based learning covering the whole country: women, men and children, with an emphasis on the needs of out-of-school children and urban unemployed youth. Using distance education as a means, together with group meetings and visiting teachers, the programme is designed to meet a variety of learning needs. Now that the education system has been decentralised, as much as possible of the learning material will be produced locally.

Several factors combine to make this new programme possible: the experience gained from the Gobi Women's Project, growing collaboration with bodies outside the system, the sharing of resources and experienced people at central and local levels, and not least, the enthusiasm of those who were key actors in the Gobi Women's Project. Significantly, the new project director is a woman. Mongolian society has already undergone a far-reaching transition and non-formal and distance education programmes, like winds of change, are reaching out to learners and creating new forms and ways of learning.

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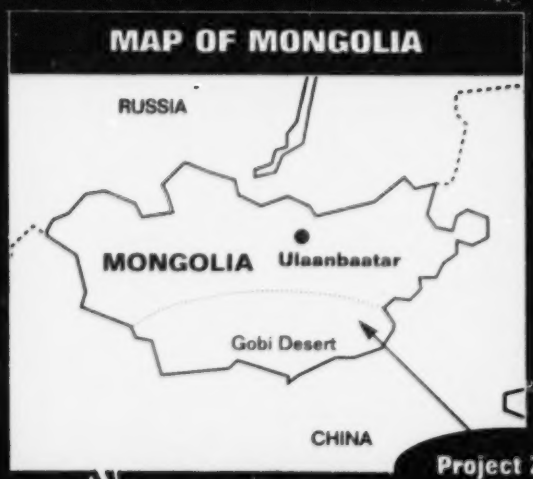
FEATURES
Making it work



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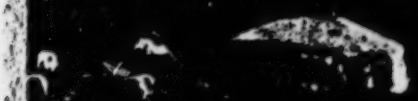
MONGOLIA : *Facts and Figures*

Location: Central Asia, bordered by Russia in the north and China in the south
Area: 1,567,000 sq. km.
Population: 2.3 million
Population of capital city: 26.8 million
Number of children per woman: 1.5 persons
Number of people per household: 2.6
Number of children per household: 4.6
Life expectancy: 64 for men (65 for women)
Urban population: 53%
Rural population: 47%
Literacy rate: 49%
Population growth rate: 2.7 (1993)
Who has access to safe water: 81% - 93% (differs according to source)
Who has access to health services: 75% + (differs according to source)
GDP: US$ 340 (1994)
Unemployment: 30%
Religion: Buddhism, Lamaism
Capital city: Ulaanbaatar
Number of provinces: 21



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GLOSSARY

Aimag	Province (the largest administrative unit). Mongolia has 21 aimags, of which six are in the Gobi.
Airag	Fermented mare's milk.
Deel	Traditional Mongolian garment worn by men and women.
Gobi	Desert of Southern Mongolia.
Ger	Mobile, circular felt dwelling, built over a wooden frame.
Sum	District (the rural administrative unit below the aimag). Mongolia has 336 sums, of which 62 are in the Gobi. The sum or district centre is a small settlement of gers and wooden huts which house between 200 and 500 families.
Tugrik	Mongolian national currency.

INNOVATIONS

- The Gobi Women's Project introduced ideas of non-formal education and continuing adult education to Mongolia. It implemented the country's first large-scale non-formal education project, stimulating other non-formal education activities as a result.

- The Gobi Women's Project was the first distance education project to be carried out in Mongolia, demonstrating a model of distance learning appropriate for the educational goals, the life contexts of learners and the physical infrastructure of the country.

- The Gobi Women's Project based its programme firmly on a needs assessment study which examined the changing conditions of rural women and their communities and designed learning materials in response to the expressed needs of the target population. This was a major change in a country where centrally-devised curricula had been the norm.

- The Gobi Women's Project design provided scope for local initiatives and regional variation (additional booklets and newsletters, locally produced radio programmes) to be combined with a centrally-produced core of printed materials and radio programmes.

- The Gobi Women's Project revived lost traditional skills, improved existing ones, and enhanced the quality of life for many rural women who would otherwise have been isolated and without learning opportunities.

- The Gobi Women's Project acted as a catalyst in the formation of local groups and networks of specialists and resource persons (veterinarians, doctors, teachers, local officials) who visited learners at home or organised group meetings.

The Gobi Women's Project proved effective in mobilising rural and nomadic women to become active learners and in generating new networks of support. Radio had the ability to bring various forces into play, especially interaction (sharing of knowledge, information flows and practical mutual help). The visiting teachers carried out their work on an unpaid voluntary basis.

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Education for All, Making it Work is a major international UNESCO/UNICEF programme to collect, analyze and promote successful basic education projects in the developing world.

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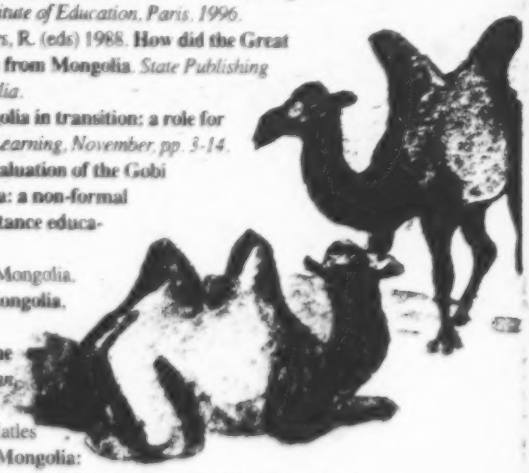

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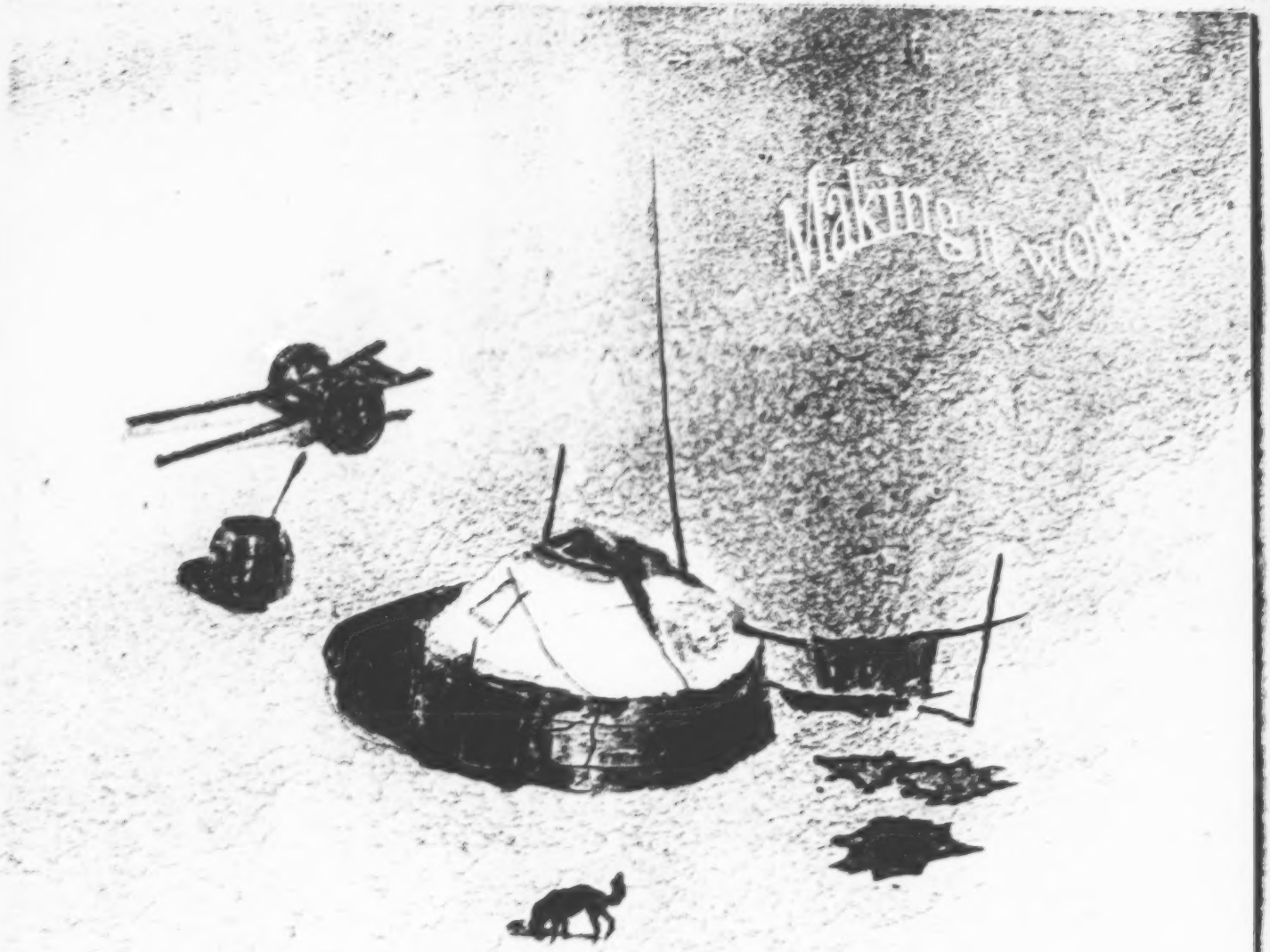

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All the Women of the Gobi Desert

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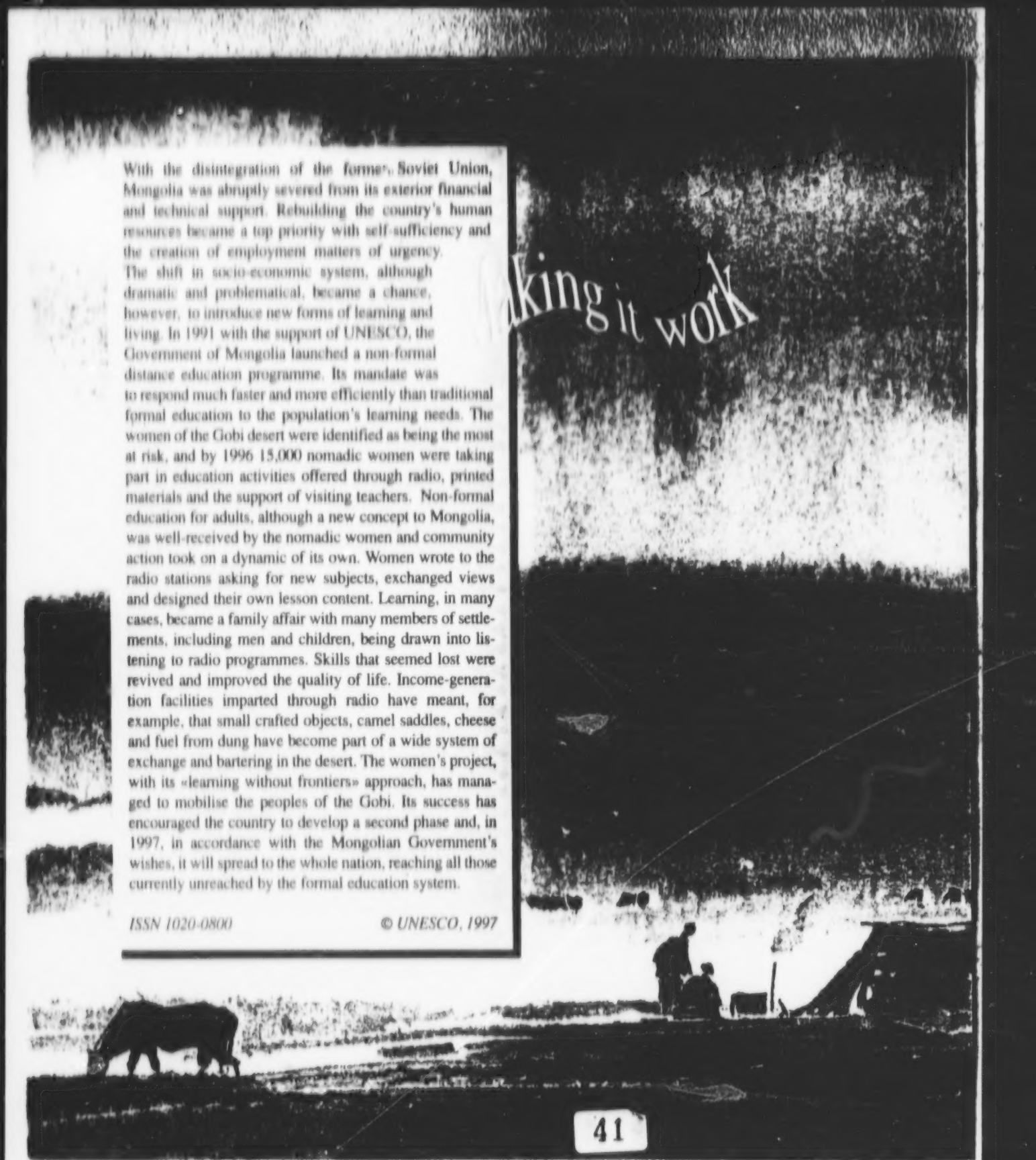

aking it work

With the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, Mongolia was abruptly severed from its exterior financial and technical support. Rebuilding the country's human resources became a top priority with self-sufficiency and the creation of employment matters of urgency.

The shift in socio-economic system, although dramatic and problematical, became a chance, however, to introduce new forms of learning and living. In 1991 with the support of UNESCO, the Government of Mongolia launched a non-formal distance education programme. Its mandate was to respond much faster and more efficiently than traditional formal education to the population's learning needs. The women of the Gobi desert were identified as being the most at risk, and by 1996 15,000 nomadic women were taking part in education activities offered through radio, printed materials and the support of visiting teachers. Non-formal education for adults, although a new concept to Mongolia, was well-received by the nomadic women and community action took on a dynamic of its own. Women wrote to the radio stations asking for new subjects, exchanged views and designed their own lesson content. Learning, in many cases, became a family affair with many members of settlements, including men and children, being drawn into listening to radio programmes. Skills that seemed lost were revived and improved the quality of life. Income-generation facilities imparted through radio have meant, for example, that small crafted objects, camel saddles, cheese and fuel from dung have become part of a wide system of exchange and bartering in the desert. The women's project, with its «learning without frontiers» approach, has managed to mobilise the peoples of the Gobi. Its success has encouraged the country to develop a second phase and, in 1997, in accordance with the Mongolian Government's wishes, it will spread to the whole nation, reaching all those currently unreached by the formal education system.

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